

Benazir blames Sharif for missile-related US sanctions

Washington, May 11 - Opposition Pakistan People's Party (PPP) leader Benazir Bhutto has blamed Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif's inept leadership for the slapping of U.S. sanctions against the country's premier research institution after the test-firing of the Ghauri missile.

In a television interview here yesterday, Bhutto claimed Sharif had been unable to defend Pakistan's security interests and as a result sanctions had been slapped on Khan Research Laboratories, according to India Abroad News Service.

To drive her point home, she recalled how during his previous rule Pakistan came on the verge of being declared a terrorist state by the U.S. It was subject to pressure to roll back the country's nuclear programme. "This time when he becomes PM (Prime Minister), we unilaterally sign the Chemical Weapons Convention (CWC) and now new

(missile-related) sanctions are being imposed," Bhutto remarked.

She claimed this was happening "because he (Sharif) can't talk without double talk. He says one thing in Washington and another in Islamabad. When you double talk, you can't get away with it."

Referring to the "shabby" treatment meted out to her and her father, the slain Prime Minister Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, she said: "I think Pakistan can attract the best and the brightest minds only when people shed cynicism and give credit where it is due. Otherwise, they will stay out of politics."

She recalled how her father, who gave the country its nuclear programme, was hanged and she, who armed Pakistan with missile capability to deliver nuclear weapons, saw her brother Murtaza assassinated, husband incarcerated and her inherited "legitimate" assets

frozen.

She dismissed the corruption allegations against her and her family as "baseless and false." The Sharif government has spent millions of dollars in its witch-hunt campaign against her, she claimed.

Bhutto said during her tenure as Prime Minister, Pakistan's annual growth rate rose from two to six per cent and foreign investment accelerated. She claimed Pakistan was then a leading voice of moderation in the Muslim world and played a critical role in the U.N. conference on human rights in Beijing and on Population Growth where U.S. Vice President Al Gore praised her as a catalyst for change.

She also referred to the passage by the U.S. Congress of the Brown Amendment, which released millions of dollars worth of embargoed American arms to Pakistan.

"I have given my life for Pakistan," she said. "I have sacrificed my children's happiness and my own happiness as my father did before me." Then, in an obvious reference to Sharif -- a businessman who was brought into politics by military ruler Zia-ul-Haq -- she said it was unfortunate for the country that those who had been bred in the lap of the military dictatorship and plundered the nation had the resources and the wealth to wage a media campaign to discredit Pakistan's "authentic leadership."

Asked about the allegations of corruption against her husband Asif Ali Zardari and his accounts in Swiss banks, a combative Bhutto remarked: "My enemies thought he is my Achilles heel and spread the poison and all sorts of bizarre stories against him. He has spent five of the ten years we have been married behind bars.



Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak, left, meets his Indonesian counterpart President Suharto in Cairo, Sunday. Suharto is in Cairo to attend a G-15 summit scheduled to begin Monday. — AP/UNB photo

Media relations specialist to aid Monica Lewinsky

WASHINGTON, May 11: Former White House intern Monica Lewinsky and her family are adding a media relations specialist -- a former deputy press secretary to President George Bush -- as the investigation of President Bill Clinton reaches a critical phase, reports AP.

Judy Smith, who has worked for investigators in the Iran-Contra scandal and the drug prosecution of Washington Mayor Marion Barry, was beginning her job Monday at the urging of Monica, her father, Dr. Bernard Lewinsky, and her mother, Marcia Lewis.

Monica's lawyer, William Ginsburg, said Sunday night that he is "delighted to have Ms. Smith on board," a move that will allow him and co-counsel Nathaniel Speights "to focus more intently on the legal issues."

Whitewater prosecutor Kenneth Starr recently won an important court victory regarding Monica Lewinsky when a judge ruled there is no immunity agreement that would protect her from prosecution in the investigation.

Vajpayee urged to act tough to make govt perform better

NEW DELHI, May 11: Indian Commerce Minister Ramakrishna Hegde has asked Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee to act tough to make his fractious coalition perform better, newspapers said today, reports Reuters.

Hegde was quoted as saying in an interview to the private home television channel that he was "not fully satisfied" with the performance of the Hindu nationalist prime minister because he had not asserted himself.

"Where hard decisions have to be taken, one has to assert (oneself)," Hegde said in the interview, which marked a new episode of tensions between allies in the six-week-old coalition.

The statement appeared to revive tensions between southern partners that helped Vajpayee's Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) form a minority government in a hung parliament.

"I agree if you say that the prime minister should have asserted himself when unreasonable demands were made. Many people say perhaps he committed a mistake," said Hegde, a leader of the regional Lok Shakti Party.

The minister did not explain what he meant by unreasonable demands, but he apparently was referring to statements by Jayaram Jayalalitha, leader of the Tamil Nadu state's All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (AIADMK) Party.

The AIADMK is a key ally of the Vajpayee government, which recently pressured Vajpayee to sack Hegde because he faced adverse remarks by a commission probing corruption in his Karnataka state during when he was chief minister.

Jayalalitha made the demand after one of her aides, S.R. Muthiah, quit the Federal Cabinet while facing charges of having ill-gotten wealth. He denied any wrongdoing.

Hegde, who says he is innocent of any corruption charge, was earlier locked in a tussle with Jayalalitha over demands linked to the sharing of the waters of Cauvery River, which flows from Karnataka to Tamil Nadu.

Newspapers have also extensively reported on Jayalalitha's demands for ministerial berths and portfolios for her followers and allies.

Hegde was quoted as saying Vajpayee should reshuffle his Cabinet after the June 1 deadline for the 1998-99 (April-March) federal budget.

"By that time he will know whose attitude is what, so he can move the right people to the right job," he said.

Hegde denied a suggestion that Vajpayee was weak, but said he might have been affected by "physical fatigue."

He also described as "unnecessary" a reported statement by Defence Minister George Fernandes of the Socialist Samata Party that China was the main threat to India.

"We should not say anything unnecessarily which would strain our relationship, particularly with China," Hegde was quoted as saying.

Fernandes said on Sunday that his comments about China, which Beijing protested, had been distorted by the media.

Strike in Pakistan to oppose changes to blasphemy law

FAISALABAD, Pakistan, May 11: Police fired tear-gas here today to disperse stone throwing Muslim militants during a strike called by Islamic parties to oppose changes to Pakistan's tough blasphemy law, residents said, reports AFP.

Shops, markets, business centres and factories were shut in response to the strike call made after Christian leaders stepped up a campaign to force changes in the law.

Police and paramilitary troops have tightened security, blocking all entry points and barricading main roads. "It is a curfew like situation," one resident told AFP by telephone.

Six people were wounded in the Malabang shooting, about two hours after polls opened to find a successor to President Fidel Ramos and to fill 17,300 other posts, the town's mayoral candidate Calib Maruhim said.

Maruhim said the two dead were his campaign supporters and he had reported the incident to the police.

The victims were at a minibus terminal waiting to escort ballot boxes for distribution at voting centres when unidentified armed men opened fire.

Polls begin amid violence in Philippines: Eight killed

COTABATO, Philippines, May 11: Eight people were killed and 11 wounded in scattered attacks during the opening hours of the Philippine elections today as millions of voters went to the polls, reports AFP.

In the troubled south, Dante Limbong and Reneboy Dads were killed during an attempted ballot box snatching in Malabang town, Lanao Del Sur province, a candidate there said.

In northern Abra province, town council candidate Genaro Batalao was shot and killed, police said, bringing the campaign toll since February to 43.

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5 Indian soldiers drown in Kashmir

NEW DELHI, May 11: Five Indian army soldiers were swept away and drowned Sunday when their patrol boat sank in a mountain river in the strife-torn state of Kashmir, the press Trust of India reported, reports AFP.

It said a junior officer and four soldiers drowned and 10 others were rescued by villagers from the fast-flowing Chenab river when the boat went down in the northernmost Udhampur district.

An army Major, meanwhile, shot himself in the head in the Kashmir city of Pulwama on Sunday, officials said, but declined to give any reasons for the suicide.

Suicides by Indian soldiers in Kashmir have been attributed to stress and depression caused by the anti-insurgency military operation in the region.

Register for July polls, Hun Sen urges voters

KOMPONG TRALACH, Cambodia, May 11: Cambodian leader Hun Sen today urged voters to register for the July 26 general election and said he would cancel public engagements for four weeks to ease the process, reports Reuters.

Registration for the key election is due to begin on May 18 and be completed by June 15. It was originally scheduled to have begun late last month but was postponed for technical reasons.

"I want to appeal to everyone to go and register to vote on July 26," Hun Sen said in a speech at an opening ceremony for a mosque, about 40 km north of Phnom Penh. He also urged voters to support whichever party they chose in the July election.

The international community is hoping the July election will restore stability in Cambodia after months of crisis and renewed conflict following Hun Sen's ouster last July of his coalition partner and co-premier, Prince Norodom Ranariddh.

Suharto's critics demand end to his 32-year rule

JAKARTA, May 11: Prominent critics of President Suharto demanded an end to his 32-year rule Monday, and one urged the armed forces that have been the leader's power base to switch sides and back the people, reports AP.

Amien Rais, leader of Indonesia's second-largest Muslim organisation, vowed to bring together a team of political, ethnic and religious leaders to face down the government, which he called "the most corrupt regime in the universe."

"I urge the government of President Suharto to step down as the people demand," Rais told thousands of cheering followers.

Separately, a group of retired generals and Cabinet ministers issued a statement criticising Suharto for "moral decadence" and urged the pro-Suharto assembly that named him to a seventh five-year term in March to revoke the appointment.

Rais gave a pair of fiery speeches in Jakarta, including one at a mosque under the guise of a religious meeting to skirt rules on political gatherings. Dozens of police kept watch.

US envoy warns of dangerous situation in Kosovo

TIRANA, May 11: US special envoy Richard Holbrooke warned Sunday of an "extraordinarily dangerous" situation in the troubled Serbian province of Kosovo where ethnic Albanians are pressing for independence from Belgrade, reports AFP.

Holbrooke issued his warning after meeting Albanian Prime Minister Fatos Nano, whose country has come under pressure from Belgrade over the growing conflict in the Albanian-majority province in southern Serbia.

The US envoy, who was the main architect of the 1995 Bosnian peace accords, had earlier in the day met Kosovo Albanian leader Ibrahim Rugova. On Saturday he met Yugoslav President Slobodan Milosevic in Belgrade.

Iraq accuses US of blocking reconciliation with Kurds

BAGHDAD, May 11: Deputy Prime Minister Tareq Aziz has said he is holding talks with rebel Kurdish groups from northern Iraq but accused the United States of trying to block a reconciliation, reports AFP.

Aziz, in a meeting with a delegation led by US former Attorney General Ramsey Clark late Saturday, said he met officials of the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) earlier this month in Baghdad.

He plans to hold similar talks with the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) next week, Aziz said during the encounter with Clark that was also attended by journalists.

The Deputy Premier said the United States was trying to prevent the rival Kurdish groups from reaching an accord with the central government following a seven-year break.

BRIEFLY

Mongolian president in Japan: President N. Bagabandi arrived in Tokyo Monday to begin a five-day state visit, the first by a Mongolian leader to Japan. AP says from Tokyo.

Bagabandi's visit is the first to Japan by a Mongolian president as an official guest of state. Mongolian presidents have made brief stops in the past, such as to attend the funeral of emperor Hirohito in 1989.

15 evangelicals die in Brazil: A bus packed with evangelicals returning from a religious congress swerved to avoid a car and hit a tree early Sunday, killing 15 people and injuring 41, the Brazilian News Agency Estado said. AFP reports from Rio De Janeiro.

The accident occurred shortly after the bus pulled out of the town of Pindamonhangaba en route for Sao Paulo, the agency said. The death toll may rise since many of the injured are in critical condition, the agency said.

Japanese fighter crashes into sea: A Japanese F-4 fighter crashed into the East China Sea today but both the pilot and co-pilot were rescued, officials and reports said, AFP reports from Tokyo.

The air self-defense force aircraft plunged into the sea, 160 kilometres north of the force's Naha base, in Okinawa, an island off southern Japan, a spokesman for the agency said.

Thai-US direct air route approved: The International Civil Aviation Organization has approved a direct route between the United States, and Thailand that will halve the normal flight time, AP says from Bangkok.

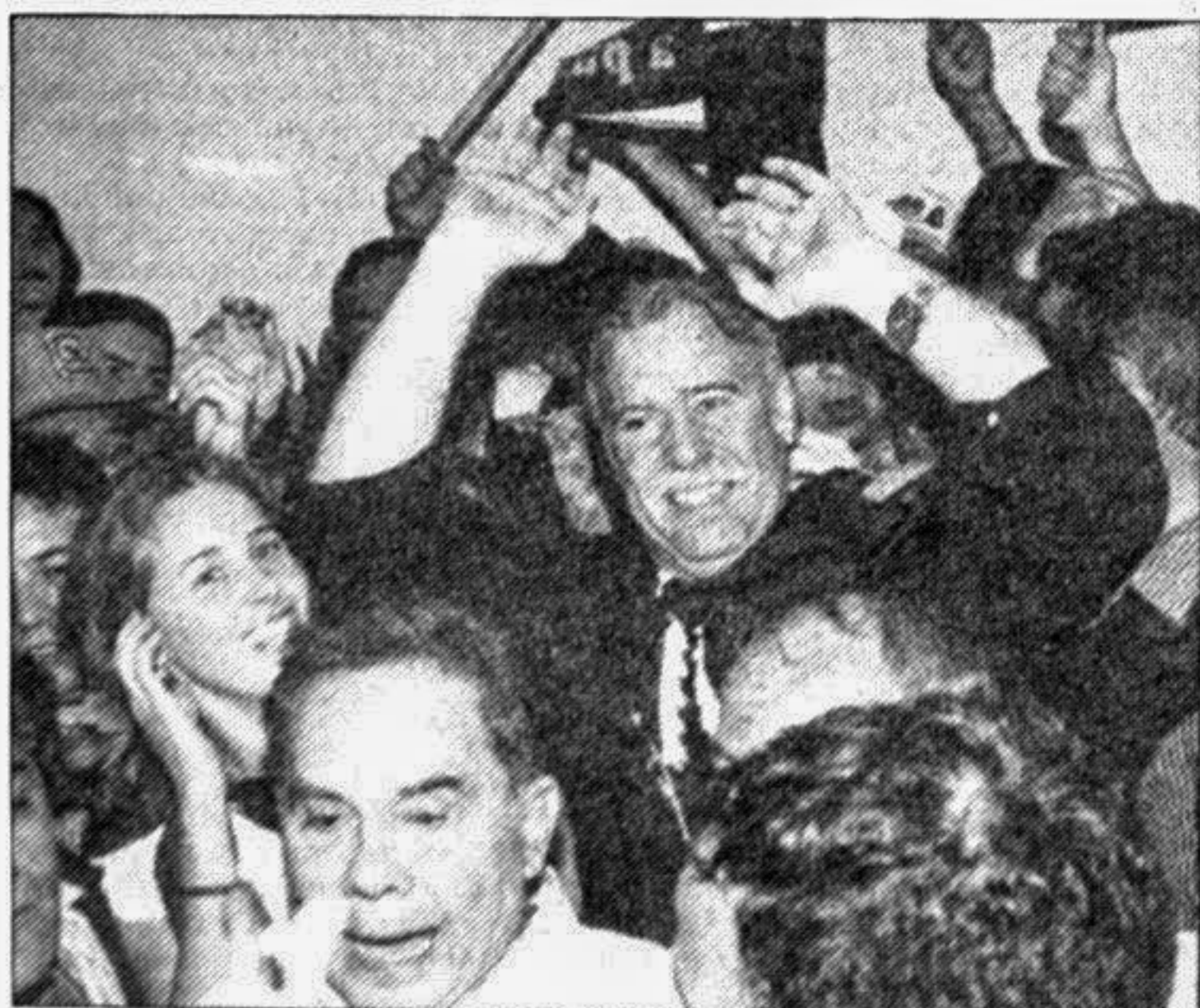
The route, which goes over the North Pole, would cut flying time to 12 hours, The Bangkok Post said Monday. Flying time between the two countries normally ranges from 22 to 23 hours.

11 miners killed in China: At least 11 people were killed in a landslide at a quarry in central Anhui province, the China Daily reported yesterday, as the search continued for two more people, AFP says from Beijing.

The missing pair are believed to have also been killed by the rock-and-mud slide on May 3 in the city of Chaohu, the report said.

Hungarian PM leading in polls: Hungarian Prime Minister Gyula Horn's Socialist Party took an early lead in yesterday's general election, capturing almost a third of the vote with 10 per cent of the first round ballots counted, Reuters reports from Budapest.

Figures announced by the national election committee put the socialists on 32.03 per cent, six points ahead of the centre-right opposition Fidesz or Hungarian Civic Party with the 26.11 per cent.



Elected Paraguayan President Raul Cubas, of the ruling right-wing Colorado Party waves as he arrives at his party's headquarters in Asuncion, Sunday to address the nation. At left his daughter Silvia, in front, his running mate Luis Maria Argana. — AP/UNB photo

Govts should stop using UN as 'scapegoat': Annan

ASMARA, May 11: UN Secretary General Kofi Annan said Sunday in an interview with AFP at the end of an eight-nation African tour, that governments should stop using the United Nations as a "scapegoat" for their own shortcomings.

Annan who received a frosty reception in Rwanda where leaders said the UN has failed to act on warnings of the looming 1994 bloodbath, was asked if he agreed with his predecessor Boutros Boutros-Ghali that the initials SG (secretary general) often meant "scapegoat."

"I think the Secretary General has always been used as a scapegoat. We serve as an alibi for member states and for leaders. But I think we have to be careful to some extent about using the UN as a scapegoat for responsibilities and actions, or inactions, that belong elsewhere, because after a while it is no longer credible," Annan said.

I think perhaps the time has come for us as secretaries to raise the issue very frankly with the member states and also with the public to get them to understand of that this scapegoating of the UN and this hiding behind the UN, do not encourage member states and leaders to face the issues, and that in the end, it is counter productive."

Asked at the end of his eight-nation African tour, whether the tour would influence the contents of a report he presented to the Security Council in April on conflict management in Africa, Annan said not.

"What I have seen validates my report. What also encouraged me was the reaction of heads of states. Two of them said, let's try and attend to a document of action, so we can have a follow-through and they are enthusiastic about it," he said.

Annan was asked if, after his success in averting military action in Iraq, he thought there was a particular way to resolve conflicts in Africa, he said the same approach would not work in Iraq, as in Bosnia or Africa.

"First of all the nature of conflicts are never the same in any case, even in the same continent. Africa has its own peculiarities, its history and conditions which are special to the continent. You can't use the same approach in Iraq or in Georgia, or in Bosnia as you can use in Africa."

Israel names new military chief

JERUSALEM, May 11: An Iranian-born general was named Israel's next military chief of staff Sunday, ending a week-long wrangle that critics said had injected too much politics into the army, reports AP.

Maj. Gen. Shaul Mofaz, 50, a deputy chief of staff and close friend of Defense Minister Yitzhak Mordechai, was chosen over his rival, a childhood neighbour of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. The choice was to have been announced on May 1, but was delayed nearly two weeks because of intense lobbying.

Although the selection must be formally approved by Israel's Cabinet Tuesday, Netanyahu's acceptance of Mordechai's choice rules out any other candidates.

It was not yet clear whether the other contender, Maj. Gen.

Mass funeral held for mudslide victims in Italy

SARNO, Italy, May 11: On one side of town, thousands of residents wept and prayed at a mass funeral for 83 of their dead. On the other, rescue workers dug through layer after layer of hardened mud and debris searching for the dozens still feared buried, reports AP.

On Monday, six days after torrential rains sent rivers of mud barreling down Mount Sarno, destroying everything in their path, the death toll stood at 124. All but 16 were from Sarno.

Loaded on the back of army trucks, 83 flower-laden coffins moved in a funeral procession Sunday toward the outdoor soccer stadium where Sarno's bishop celebrated mass. Among them was the tiny white coffin of Sarno's youngest victim, a 3-month old infant.

Mourners wailed and clutched in desperation at the passing bodies of loved ones. The victims had to be buried in the town's newer cemetery because the old one lies buried under four-meters (13 feet) of sludge.

Off the Record

'Mother Of The Year' award for mother of 21

NEVERSINK, New York: No one could fault Sarah Curry's credentials for Mother of the Year.

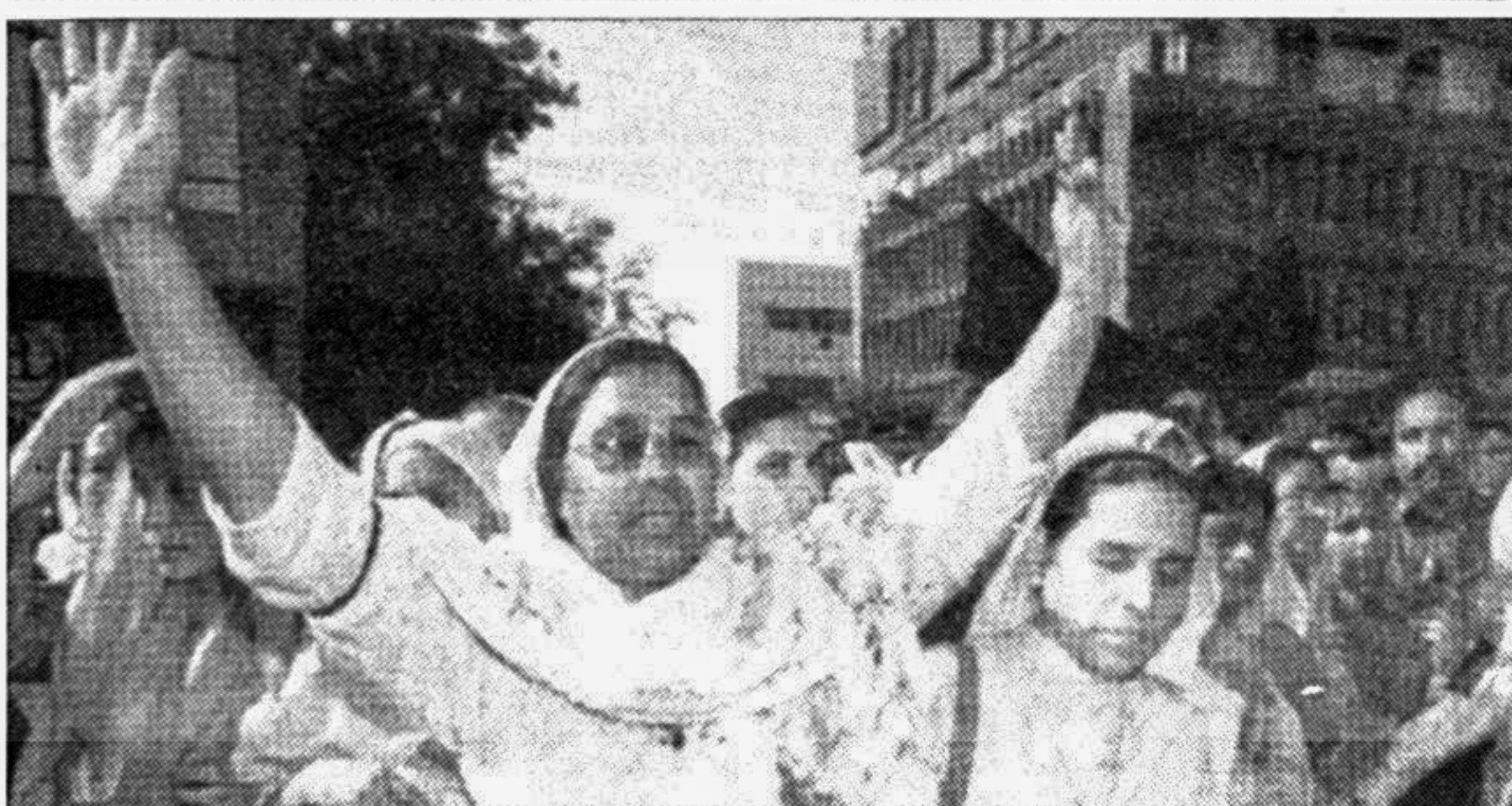
She had 21 children, and now notes on 32 grandchildren. "It just kind of happened. It wasn't anything planned," said daughter Ramona Howe, her second child. "One mom. One dad. One marriage."

Mrs. Curry, who turns 60 this Friday, had 12 girls and nine boys, now ranging in age from 15 to 38. One child died several years ago of a rare blood disorder.

She was the most special Mother's Day guest Sunday for the ceremony at the Monticello Raceway, which sponsored the award.

The harness horse racing track about 135 kilometres north of New York City held a party for her and one of the day's races was named in her honour -- the Sarah Curry race.

The family grew up in a big farmhouse, doubling up in beds.



Nuns protest against the burning of Christian houses in Faisalabad by activists of Pakistan's religious militant party, in Karachi, Sunday. The violence broke out as thousands of mourners gathered to bury Bishop John Joseph who committed suicide in protest against Pakistan's blasphemy laws. — AP/UNB photo

US weighing new moves for ME peace

WASHINGTON, May 11: Faced with Israel's rejection of US terms for a peace conference, US Secretary of State Madeleine Albright and her senior Mideast advisers are weighing their next moves in what is shaping up as a major setback for the Clinton administration, reports AP.

The United States gambled that Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's eagerness to launch talks on a final settlement with the Palestinians would overcome his objections to a pullback by Israeli troops from 13 per cent of the West Bank.

The gamble did not pay off. American envoy Dennis Ross could not persuade the tough Israeli leader to agree to the terms for opening the peace talks Monday in Washington, and the finger-pointing and US head-scratching began.

Albright, Ross, Assistant Secretary of State Martin Indyk, national security adviser Sandy Berger and other senior American officials are discussing the next steps after President Bill Clinton's hopes of a peace conference her Monday with Netanyahu and Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat vanished.

Netanyahu refused various proposals presented by Ross over the weekend in Jerusalem for a 13 per cent pullback from the West Bank in exchange for tougher Palestinian measures against terrorism. Arafat was willing to settle for 13 per cent on top of the 27 per cent already relinquished by Israel, hoping later to gain virtually all of the West Bank for establishment of a state.

The New York Times web site reported Monday from Jerusalem that the administration has given Netanyahu a two-week extension to reconsider his stance. "We are sticking by the points we laid out," and "we intensified US official close to the negotiations was quoted as saying. "We agreed to a reprieve to make it absolutely clear we're doing everything we can."

After her own difficult talks with Netanyahu in London last

week Albright appeared to rule out abandoning US attempts to mediate between the two Mideast leaders.

"We are not going to walk away from the peace process," she said. "It is too important to the United States, to Israel and to our friends."

Instead, the United States may increase pressure on Israel by publicising its proposals for ending the 14-month deadlock between Israel and the Palestinians. In addition to the troop pullback, the plan is also known to include a demand Israel stop building homes for Jews on the West Bank or in east Jerusalem.

Such a tactic could backfire, however. It might not only fail to budge Netanyahu, but also cause Israel's supporters in Congress to step up their denunciation of the administration's tactics. When the Clinton administration last month threatened to go public with its proposals, 81 senators wrote Clinton advising against it.

Alternatively, Albright and her advisers could decide to

make another diplomatic effort to turn Netanyahu around, with the aim of holding the peace talks within a few weeks.

Due in the United States this week for speeches, Netanyahu plans as his first order of business to meet with members of Congress Thursday morning.

Netanyahu will have several occasions here to make his case to the American public. His agenda includes meetings with American Jewish groups, a meeting with UN chief Kofi Annan in New York, and interviews with American editors.

No meetings have been arranged so far with administration officials, and Albright is due to fly with Clinton to Germany mid-day Tuesday.

If Clinton and Albright decide on a "reassessment" of US policy in the Middle East, it could increase the strains already evident in US relations with Israel.

As Ross ended his mission Sunday in Jerusalem, Palestinians blamed Netanyahu while Israeli officials complained that the invitation to

Washington peace talks had been and ultimatum.

David Bar-Illan, a top aide to Netanyahu, said it was unlikely that a new date for the summit could be fixed until late in the month because of Netanyahu's travel plans.

Palestinian negotiator Saeb Erekat, who met with Ross on Sunday, blamed Netanyahu for the breakdown in negotiations. He said Arafat's acceptance of 13 per cent plus taking tougher security measures was a compromise on the Palestinian side.

"The Americans must take decisive decisions. They must stop Netanyahu before it's too late," he said.

The Israeli newspaper Maariv reported Netanyahu had accused the Americans of portraying him as an obstacle to peace during a meeting Friday with Ross.

"It's impossible for you to invite me to Washington under such conditions. That's public humiliation," said Netanyahu, raising his voice and pounding on his desk.